



Press Release

Luxembourg, 12 April 2016

Cutting nutrient pollution in the Baltic: limited progress and lack of ambition, say EU auditors

EU action to cut nutrient pollution in the Baltic Sea has had only a limited effect, according to a new report from the European Court of Auditors. The auditors found that Member States' plans lack ambition and appropriate indicators. Investment in waste-water infrastructure has been only partly effective, agricultural measures do not match up to the scale of the problem and the added value of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea is difficult to assess.

The Baltic is one of the world's most polluted seas. It is bordered by eight EU Member States (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden) and by Russia.

Between 2007 and 2013, the EU contributed €4.6 billion to waste-water collection and treatment projects in five Member States bordering the Baltic. Rural development measures in all eight Baltic Member States bordering the Baltic, including water protection, amounted to a further €9.9 billion. In addition, from 2001 to 2014, the EU co-financed projects with a value of nearly €50 million in Russia and Belarus to improve water quality.

The auditors visited three Member States with Baltic coasts (Finland, Latvia and Poland) and conducted a survey in all of the other Member States bordering the Baltic Sea. EU-supported projects in Russia and Belarus were checked through documents at the European Commission. The audit examined whether EU action had been effective in helping Member States to reduce nutrient pollution in the Baltic. The overall conclusion was that there has been only limited progress.

"Improving water quality in the Baltic needs more targeted action and more co-operation with Russia" said Mr Ville Itälä, the Member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the report. "A clean Baltic Sea is the dream of almost 100 million people. To achieve that, the countries concerned should make much fuller use of the powers available to them".

The biggest polluter of the Baltic is agriculture, say the auditors, and the main problems are insufficient action and poor targeting. For example, in Poland, only 5 % of the land area is designated as "nitrate-vulnerable", which means that intensive water protection is not applied over a large enough area. The whole of Finland, on the other hand, is designated as nitrate-vulnerable; this means that intensive measures are not targeted to the areas where they are most needed. The auditors also say that the requirements of agri-environmental schemes are not always strict enough.

Despite significant EU funding for urban waste water projects, the implementation of the Waste Water Treatment Directive has been delayed and the European Commission has not followed up its implementation in good time. Nevertheless,

The purpose of this press release is to give the main messages of the special report adopted by the European Court of Auditors.

The full report is on www.eca.europa.eu

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nutrient loads from urban areas have been reduced.

Co-financed projects in Russia and Belarus do seem to be cost-efficient. However, implementation is slow, and projects are too small to meet actual levels of need. For example, the level of nutrient pollution from Kaliningrad is the second highest after Saint Petersburg, but none of the water and environmental services projects approved for Kaliningrad in 2005 have yet been completed.

The auditors make a number of recommendations for the Member States and for the European Commission. The Commission should:

- require the Member States to designate appropriate nitrate-vulnerable zones,
- assess compliance with the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive more quickly,
- promote projects to reduce the nutrient load being discharged into the Baltic from Russia and Belarus.

The Member States should:

- target agri-environmental schemes to areas where the impact on nutrient reduction is highest,
- establish nitrate action programme requirements based on the most recent studies,
- plan and construct their waste water infrastructure as efficiently as possible.

Notes to editors

“Eutrophication” is a process that occurs when excess nutrients generated mostly by human activity, mainly nitrogen and phosphorus, enter a body of water. High nutrient concentrations lead to intense, potentially toxic, algal blooms. Because the Baltic Sea is connected to the world’s oceans by narrow and shallow channels, the same water can remain in the Baltic for up to 30 years. This makes it easier for nitrogen and phosphorus levels to build up, potentially causing health problems in people, fish and animals as well as damaging lakes, rivers, reservoirs, streams and wetlands.

The aim of the 2008 Marine Strategy Framework Directive is for the EU's marine waters to achieve “good” environmental status by 2020. Under that Directive, Member States must cooperate within regions and sub-regions to achieve the objectives of the Directive, using for instance, where practical and appropriate, the structures already in place under the Regional Sea Conventions.

For the Baltic Sea, the relevant convention is the Helsinki Convention (governed by the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM)) and the associated Baltic Sea Action Plan, which requires the signatory countries to reduce the nutrient load they discharge into the Baltic.

In 2009, the European Council adopted a macro-regional strategy (the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region) which aimed, in particular, to foster environmental protection, including the reduction of nutrient loads, by promoting increased cooperation between neighbouring countries and innovative solutions.

High-resolution photos are available on our website and may be re-used, provided the source is acknowledged. Eutrophic marine water. Source: HELCOM, photo by SamuliKorpinen.

Special Report No 3/2016 – “Combating eutrophication in the Baltic Sea: further and more effective action needed” is available in 23 EU languages.